

# NORTH SEA FIGHTING TOLD BY THE FIGHTERS

Letters From Sailors in the English Navy Throw Sidelights on the Victory at Sea—Trawler Skipper Tells of the Watch for Mines

THE strict English censorship has prevented the public from hearing much that is interesting concerning the intimate life of the fighting men on land and sea. M. A. St. John Adcock has in a measure supplied this deficiency by publishing a volume of private letters from soldiers and sailors in the English army and navy to friends at home. The book, which is called "In the Firing Line," is just issued by the George H. Doran Company.

In the chapter devoted to the fighting in the North Sea the author says: In the three weeks that followed the declaration of war (which came to us from time to time of how our ships were chasing and sinking the enemy's cruisers, capturing his merchantmen and keeping the ocean highways clear for our own and neutral commerce, but no word reached us from the great British fleet that was keeping watch and ward in the North Sea, waiting sleeplessly for the German navy that was sheltered behind the impregnable fort of Heligoland to dash out and make its loudly threatened raid upon our coast. We heard no word of those guardian sailormen, but we spent peacefully in our beds at night, confident in their strength, their courage, their alertness. Then suddenly, on the 28th of August, while the British and French armies were in the heat of their strategic retreat from Mons, news of our seamen's dashing fight and victory in the North Sea flashed through the land. They had grown weary of waiting, and as the German was too discreet to venture forth to the attack they had slipped into his fastness under cover of the dark and hunted him out. Until it is possible to compile a connected, orderly narrative, the tale of this brilliant engagement is best told in the letters of the men who had part in it.

From Albert Roper, first class petty officer of H. M. cruiser Talbot, to his brother at Leeds:

I cannot give you any news about our movements. It is against the rules to do so, and it's a jolly good job, too, for if it was not so, things would leak out, and that is just what we do not want. We are waiting patiently for Willie's fleet to come out to enable our chaps to have a little practice. We try to make ourselves as happy as we can in the shape of a sing-song occasionally. These evenings are well appreciated.

From Seaman Wilson of the Banchant to his wife at Hunslet:

You will have read of our victory in the North Sea. It was fine. Our ship brought the dead and wounded and the prisoners back. A grim job it was, too. I only wish the whole German fleet would come out. We may get a chance of coming home soon. Their firing is perfect. They get a hit every time. The boulders won't come out. That was the reason our ships had to try and drive them out. You see the place is all mined, and if a ship runs into one of these mines it means destruction.

The commander of the Liberty, a torpedo boat destroyer, asked his ship's company if they would volunteer to go up Kiel harbor with him, and every man said "Yes," although it looked certain death. Up they went, and got under the forts of Heligoland and let rip at the German cruisers in the harbor. One of the wounded sailors of the Liberty told us that the shells fired at them

were enough to sink a fleet. Our ship had only one torpedo and one round of ammunition left. So they turned round to come out, when a shrapnel shell struck the Liberty's mast, killing the gallant commander and three others. The coxswain, although wounded, brought the ship safely to our fleet that was waiting outside. We pray to God that we may come off victorious, and I am confident we shall, as every man in the fleet has the heart of a lion.

From a Welsh gunner on the Arethusa: Just a few lines to let you know how the war is going on. I cannot say much, as correspondence is strictly secret and letters are likely to be opened. The Commodore turned over to this ship last Wednesday and we were in action on Friday at 7:45 A. M. and finished a stiff eight hours engagement, our loss being eleven killed and fifteen injured in this ship alone.

We were done after the fight, engines disabled and had to be towed to Chatham. One man was all that was left at my gun. But still, after all, we saw them off. We blew them to —. Three flights we had. As soon as we are patched up we shall be off again.

From Gunner John Mackley of Leeds: Been in battle and, wonder of wonders, haven't scored a scratch. My ship, as you know, is the Arethusa—"Saucy Arethusa" as history knows her. She was the first there and the first that shot home. It was her that made them come and her that took the most prominent part, as all the ship's company know only too well. Now we are in dry dock.

We had to sacrifice ourselves almost to do what we did—to get them out of their shells. Not only were our marines and mines a menace, but also the fire from the forts. We got within their range and our ship suffered the most. We have got a fearful Admiral and at the same time a decent fellow.

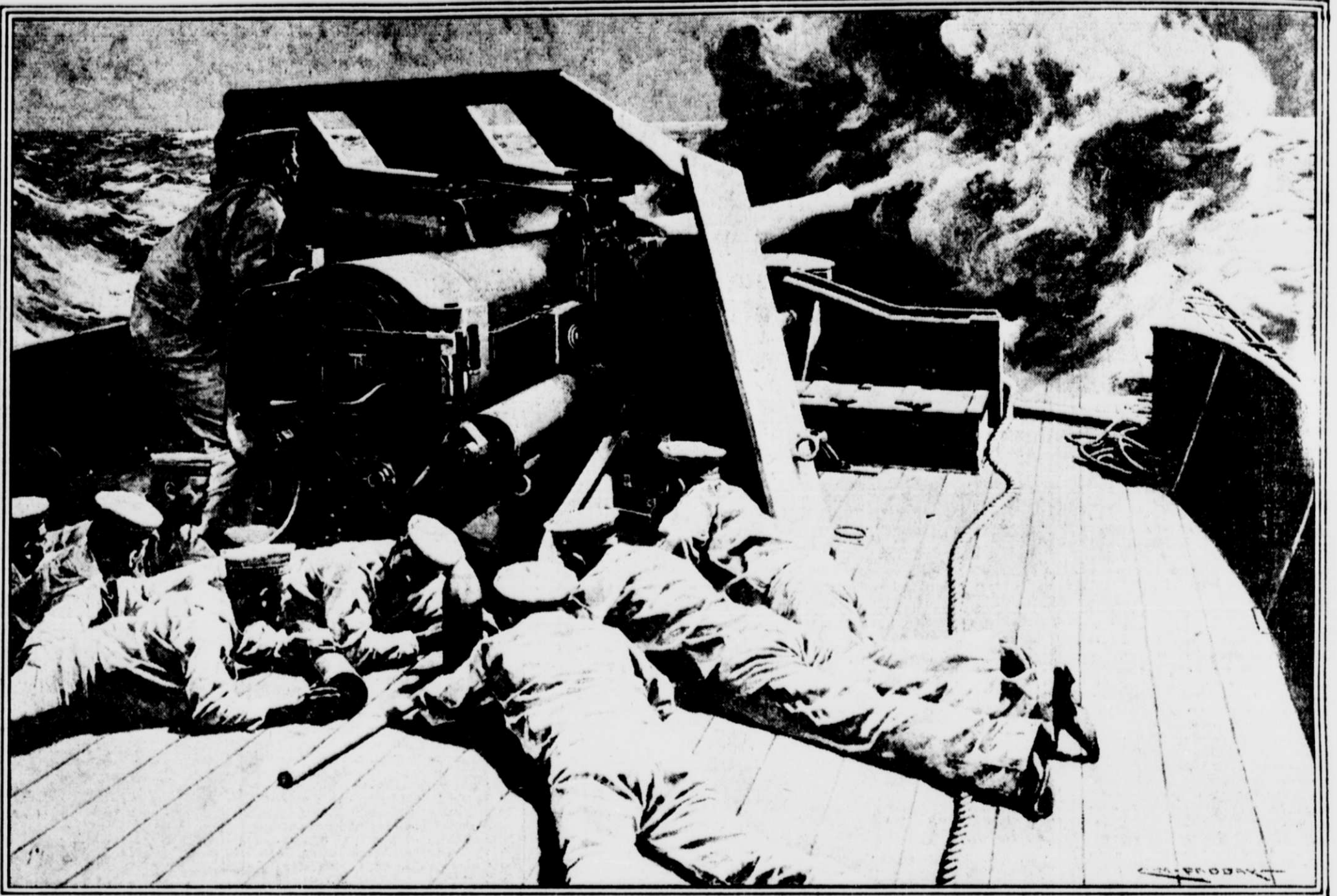
I saw an account in the papers when we got in dock and I was very pleased with it, because another ship had been mistaken for us. The name of our Commodore is Tyrwhitt.

From Mulshapman Hartley of H. M. battle cruiser Lion to his parents at Burton-on-Trent:

At last we have had a taste of gunfire, but it was only a taste. We ran into three light German cruisers. Two of them were sunk and one managed to make off in a sinking condition and badly on fire forward and aft. Of course, their guns had about the same effect on us as a daisy air rifle. The funny thing, which you should have seen, was all the stokers grubbing about after the action looking for bits of shell. The Germans fought awfully well and bravely, but the poor beggars hadn't a dog's chance of living through it. The Mainz was the name of one of those sunk. Two of their destroyers were also sunk.

From a Scottish seaman published in the "Scotsman":

It was a sight worth seeing. We chased two German destroyers of the "S" class, one of which went on fire and the other was sunk by eight British destroyers, including the Defender. We chased them for about four hours and she showed great pluck as the crew refused to haul down the flag and she sank with the German flag flying. When



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Working a six-inch gun on board the British unarmored cruiser "Highflyer."

she sank, and even before it, the sailors were swimming toward the British ships, shouting in broken English that they had surrendered and appealing for help. It was a terrible sight to see the wounded in the water and we assisted in throwing out lifebelts and ropes to them, while the whaler and a skiff were also lowered, together with small boats from the other British vessels. A German stoker said they did not want to fight England and it was too much for them, but we had done in time. It was terrible to hear the cries of the wounded in the water and we did not get a chance to pick them up. The men on the sinking destroyer struck to their guns to the last and they were firing at their own men who dived for our ships.

Some had lifebelts on and the officers tried to frighten them by saying the British would put them in front of their guns. We had only two hurt.

From a gun room officer on H. M. battle cruiser Invincible to his parents at Dover:

The particular ship we were engaged with was a pitiful sight. She was afloat with her bow high in the air, masts tottering, great gaps of daylight in her sides, smoke and flame belching from her everywhere. She seemed to be heeled over and sank like a stone, then first. So far as is known none of her crew was saved. She was gone to the last, let it be said, her guns firing till she sank, her guns barking like a dog that can bark no more. Although we suffered no loss we had some very narrow escapes. Three torpedoes were observed to pass us, one, it is said, within a few feet. Four more shells, one, full short, or were ahead of us. The sea was alive with the enemy's submarines, which, however, luckily did no damage. They should not be underestimated, these Germans. They've got "kuts," that cruiser did not think apparently of surrendering.

From a Bluenose in the North Sea to his friends at Jarrow:

On August 24 we made a dash for the German coast and were lucky enough to come across two German cruisers. Then the fun started. We pursued one, and when I tell you we can do thirty knots you can imagine what chance she had of getting away. She was a heavier boat than us, and the engagement lasted four hours. At the end of that time she was a terrible sight. She was on fire from stem to stern, the Germans were jumping overboard, and the flash only seven feet out of 400 were saved. It is a fact that the Germans only saved their guns under the orders of their officers, who stood over them with revolvers. Three dozen of their bodies which were picked up bore marks of revolver shots. Five days every week for the last four weeks we have swept the North Sea, and all we discovered were the aforesaid two cruisers and about a dozen trawlers, which we sank. There is no sign of the big German navy. They are in Kiel harbor, and if they come out, well, there will be no German navy left. The only thing they are using are mines and submarines. In fact, the so-called German navy is a "washout." We have been within ten miles of their base and they will not come out.

From Seaman Gunner Brown to his parents at Newport, Isle of Wight:

We and another ship in our squadron came across two German cruisers. We routed one and started on the second, but battle cruisers soon finished her off. Another then appeared, and after we had plunked two broadsides into her she slid off in flames. Every man did his bit, and there was a continuous stream of jokes and snatches of the projected "Love from England," "One for the Kaiser," and other such messages.

The sight of sinking German ships was gloriously terrible; funnels and masts lying about in all directions, and amidships a huge German, the burning steel looking like a big ball of sulphur. There was not the slightest sign of fear, from the youngest to the oldest man aboard.

From a man in a warship's engine room:

We stayed down there keeping the engines going at their top speed in order to cut off the Germans from their fleet. We could hear the awful din and the scurrying of the tars on the deck as they rushed about from point to point. We could hear the shells crashing

against the side of the ship or shrieking overhead as they passed harmlessly into the water, and we knew that at any moment one might strike us in a vital part, and send us below never to come up again. It is ten times harder on the men whose duty is in the engine room than for those on deck taking part in the fighting, for they at least have the excitement of the fight, and if the ship is struck they have more than a sporting chance of escape. We have none, and the medals and puts on the back when the fight is won are not for us, who are only common mechanics.

From Seaman Jack Dunnett of West Bromwich to his brother:

You will have heard of our little job in the North Sea. We sank five ships and ran a few off. Of course it was only a trial spin. We kicked off last Friday about 6 in the morning, and we won 5-11. Not bad, considering we are playing away.

Their lookers could not hold us, we were so hot. Our forwards shot beautifully and our defence was sound. We agreed to play extra time if we had not finished, but we had done in time. It must not be thought that we had it all our own way, for they were very brave and fought until one of our boys fired a shot at the last gun in the Mainz and blew the whole gun and crew as well into the sea. One of our still shouted out to give the Germans an other. We are all getting ready for the big match of the season now when their battle fleet chooses to come out. One German officer we got out of the water asked: "Are you British?" When our officer replied, "Yes," he said, "God bless you." They thought we were the French fleet.

From a seaman on H. M. S. Hecla:

The destroyer Laurel seems to have suffered the most. She had one funnel carried right away and the other riddled like a pepperbox. One shell struck her right forward, went through her bulkhead, through one galley door and out through the other. The cook was in there at the time, but he missed him and cut through the other side of the ship. That cook was born under a lucky star. It's on the bridge and around the guns where they suffered most. On the Liberty's bridge everybody except one was killed, in fact, they say they were never seen since. Poor devils, they must have been carried right overboard. The skipper of the Laurel had both his legs shot away.

The scout Arethusa came in last. She brought 100 Germans picked up off the cruiser Mainz. We didn't see them, they were landed down at Sheringham. They've got one keelsake off her. They picked up a German officer, but he died and they buried him at sea. They've got his uniform hanging up. The cooks on the Arethusa were not so lucky. Two cooks were in the galley, just having their rum, when a shell killed one and blew the others arm off. A funny thing, they've got a clock hanging up, it smashed the glass and one hand, but the booming thing's still going.

From a seaman on H. M. S. Hecla:

We had orders to pick up prisoners. As we steamed up dead bodies were floating past the ship. We went up alongside the German cruiser Mainz just before she sank and it was an awful sight. We got 224 prisoners in a most terrible state and most of them died. It is impossible to describe it all on paper. Our decks were red with blood, and you see, we are only a destroyer, so you may tell what a mess we were in.

All the Germans seemed quite happy when we got them on board. The worst job of all was getting them out of the sea. Some of them had legs stand by and rescue her survivors, she hoisted it again and opened fire. It was a dirty trick, but they got their assets, once again the Lion turned, and this time fired five shots from her huge turrets. Amid a shower of splinters, smoke and fire she disappeared. We steamed over the spot, but although there was plenty of wreckage, not a single living thing was to be seen. This incident only lasted about forty-five minutes, although the whole battle was raging for eight hours.

to pick up her swimming survivors, before the whaler got back an enemy's cruiser came up and chased the Defender, and thus she abandoned her whaler. Imagine their feelings alone in an open boat without food, twenty-five miles from the nearest land, and that land the enemy's fortress, with nothing but fog and foes around them. Suddenly a swirl alongside and up, if you please, pons his Britannic Majesty's submarine H-4, opens his conning tower, takes them all on board, stuns up again, dives and brings them home 250 miles! Is not that magnificent? No novel would dare face the enemy with an episode like that in it except, perhaps, Jules Verne; and all true!

From a seaman on one of the British destroyers:

We have at last had an innings at the Germans. It was a go. Fully seven hours we fought shot for shot. I had the pleasure of seeing four German ships go down. We never knew but it might be our turn next, as great shells were falling all around us. Several shells went just over our heads, whistling just like a needle on a broken record. Would you believe it, one of our boats had actually stopped to pick up a German wounded when the Germans first on her.

I think all our men took it just as though we were having our annual battle practice, cool, laughing and cracking jokes, with shells all around them. All the thought was just of shooting it into them and they got it. I was told they lost 1,500 men. I shall never understand how it was, our ship was not hit, for we were within range of their cruisers and the Heligoland forts. We are ready for another snack at home.

From a seaman on H. M. S. New Zealand to his wife in Heligoland:

The torpedo craft had rather a hard time with the enemy in the early morning, but suddenly we appeared out of the mist. To say that they were surprised is to put it mildly, because before they knew where they were we were playing our light cruisers, and the destroyers worried them like terriers. Then for us to come along and give them the coup de grace was absolutely true.

Two of their ships, I am convinced, would have been doing badly, but as our small ship gathered round they took off their survivors, all their flags were struck, they opened fire only to be sent to Davy Jones's locker a little quicker than they could shoot. Well, we succeeded in sending some good ships and some unfortunate men to the bottom in something like fourteen minutes. Not a bad score for the cricket season, is it?

From a seaman on board the flagship of the first destroyer squadron, to his friends at Walsingham:

We had a very decent splash last week off Heligoland, as doubtless you have read. Our ship was not hit at all, though some shots were pretty near. It was a fine sight to see the Lion demolish one cruiser. We could see her other cruiser's shots falling short, but still the Lion did not rest. For fully ten minutes the cruiser belted away without getting a hit. Then the Lion, who was leading the line, belted open fire, turned slowly and majestically round and fired her broadside—once. It was quite sufficient. It went a cloud of smoke and steam from the target, and when it cleared her aft funnel was at a rakish angle and a huge rent appeared the length of her side.

After a few more "salvos" she was rapidly sinking by the stern. Shortly afterwards she half hauled down her ensign, and as we were steaming up to stand by and rescue her survivors, she hoisted it again and opened fire. It was a dirty trick, but they got their assets, once again the Lion turned, and this time fired five shots from her huge turrets. Amid a shower of splinters, smoke and fire she disappeared. We steamed over the spot, but although there was plenty of wreckage, not a single living thing was to be seen. This incident only lasted about forty-five minutes, although the whole battle was raging for eight hours.

one of them being Admiral von Tirpitz's son, who was second lieutenant in the Mainz. We were within twenty yards of her when she went down, and I can tell you it was a grand sight. Their officers were shooting the men as they jumped overboard, and one chap on the bridge was beckoned to by our commodore to come off. But there was nothing doing. He simply folded his arms, shook his head, and as the ship rolled over he never moved. The Captain also went down in her. He had both legs blown off.

From Gunner T. White:

We didn't waste more shots than was necessary on the Germans off Heligoland. One of their destroyers was knocked over first shot. It was one of the cleanest shots we ever saw, and the man who fired it is the proudest man in our ship today.

Next time I fancy the Germans will want to make it a rule of the fight that a German ship must be allowed at least ten shots to one of ours before the knockout is fired. Of course, it's very hard on the rest of us, because it simply means that the gunner who gets first shot does the trick, and we may be in a dozen fights and never get a shot at the enemy once, because there's nothing left to hit.

An interesting account of the efficiency of this pointing of the North Sea was related by two trawler skippers a week after the fight took place. The trawler skipper, who remarks that the most important necessities a continuous vigilance, mostly under cover of the darkness and entails a strain upon the naval officers and men that can only be appreciated by those who witness it.

The first skipper stated that he had just come on board.

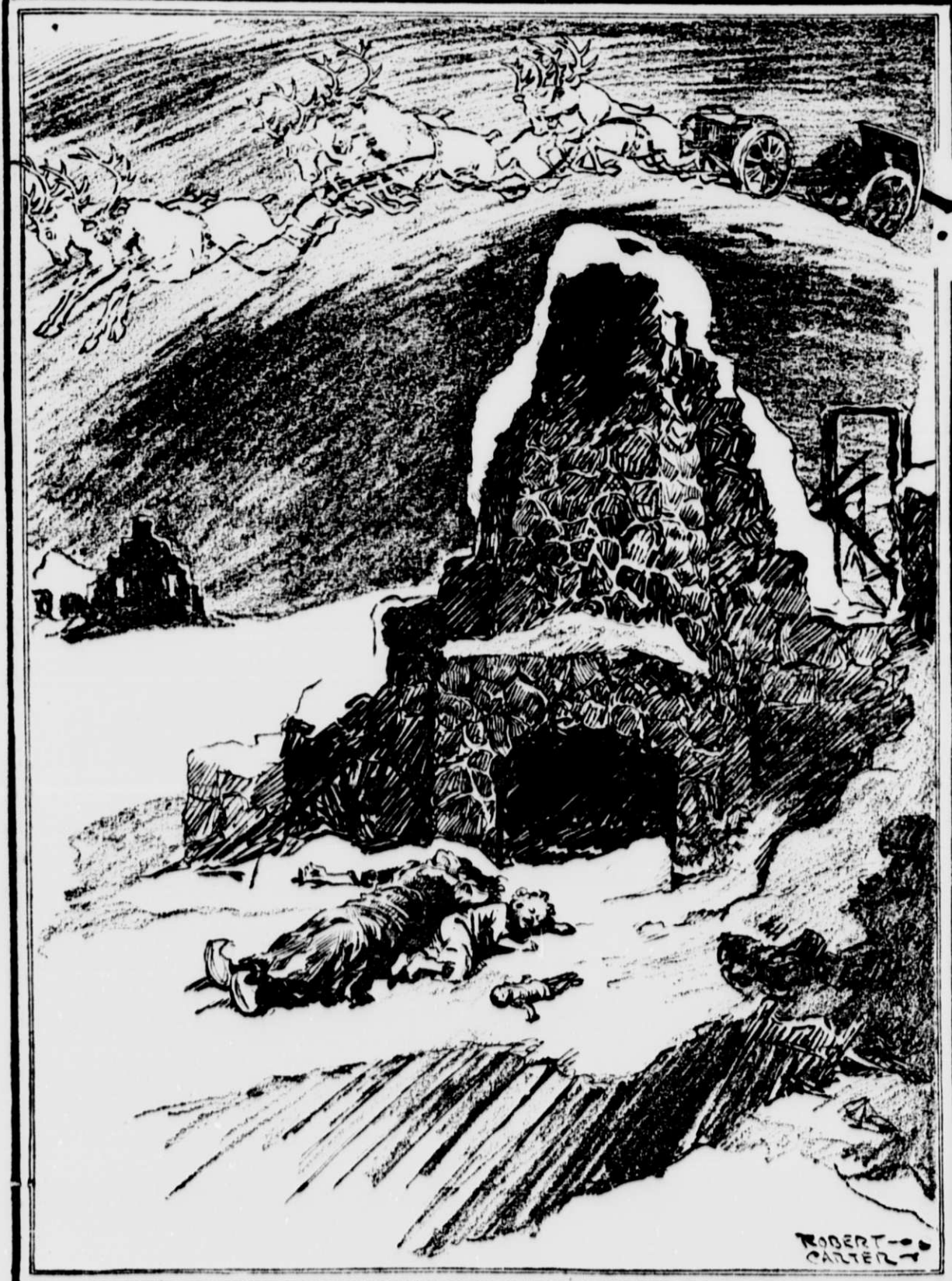
At one time on board there was, he said, a solid wall of warships, which made it impossible for any foe to break through undetected. The scenery did not end with a mere examination at the point mentioned. After being released our boat was followed by a couple of torpedo destroyers until we reached our destination. In this way we were not only convoyed, but the warships made absolutely certain that we were British trawlers. The experience being novel to us, was very inspiring.

The other skipper's story was even more interesting. He is in charge of a North Sea trawler, and anchored each night near the shore.

We were laid under the hand, he said, when about 2 in the morning a cruiser suddenly appeared alongside of us. All his lights were extinguished, and the quiet way in which he came meant the clever tactics he showed in getting alongside without doing any damage was astonishing.

Talk about one seeing in the dark, these naval officers are wonderful. When the cruiser reached us all we could see was a huge black object looming up. A voice shouted out: "Who are you?" and I answered: "I am a British trawler." "What is your name?" he asked, and I replied: "When did you leave?" he next asked: "I told him: 'Who was your order when you left?' he next asked: 'I told him and in a flash the commander of the cruiser shouted back: 'All right!'"

It was a fine piece of work, he said, but there was something even more astonishing. Directly the commander had finished talking to me, another voice from the stern of our vessel sang out: "The name is quite correct, sir." A submarine had crept up behind to verify our name and number, and although all the crew had come on deck to see what was happening, not one of the men all had seen the submarine appear. The whole episode only occupied a few minutes, and the cruiser, after a few good morning and plenty of fishing, disappeared in the darkness. I have seen the British navy in times of peace, but to see it in war time makes you feel proud of it. No swank, simply good old Nelson's motto all the time.



From "The Evening Sun" of yesterday.

A Belgian Anta Claus.